

U.S. Military Seeks Lighter Vehicles, Gear for Afghanistan

By Kris Osborn

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The U.S. Army and Marine Corps are sending more vehicles, gear and UAVs to Afghanistan, in part to adapt to the high and mountainous terrain, service officials said.

Afghanistan "requires more [intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance] because of the different terrain," said Army Maj. Gen. Robert Lennox, assistant deputy chief of staff for operations.

"You can't see as far," he said. "There are some terrain-oriented challenges and there are also bandwidth challenges. Satellite capabilities and satellite challenges are different in Afghanistan. There are not a lot of satellites there."

More UAVs will reduce the threat from roadside bombs, said Marine Brig. Gen. Michael Brogan, who leads Marine Corps Systems Command.

"We want the skill to find enemy combatants in the shadows and behind windows, so we can take the first shot and not be forced to rely on just our body armor," Brogan said.

"Anything we can do to get our troops off of the road certainly limits the enemies' opportunity to target us with IEDs."

The Army is bringing to Afghanistan its ODIN counter-IED unit, whose UAVs and small aircraft spot IED emplacements.

One analyst said increasing ISR in the mountains of Afghanistan will be difficult.

"Afghanistan has some of the most thinly covered surveillance areas in all of Asia. It is an extremely backward country, and it is a large country which does not have much of a communications infrastructure," said Loren Thompson, vice president of the Lexington Institute, a think tank based in Arlington, Va.

The need for ISR was raised during a Feb. 4 hearing into force protection by a House Armed Services Committee panel. Lawmakers asked Army and Marine Corps leaders to list their primary force-protection difficulties.

"The budget coming up in the next week is not going to address that, so I am thinking for the next DoD authorization," said Rep. Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawaii, who heads the air and land forces subcommittee.

SOLDIER GEAR

The Army is experimenting with lighter gear to help infantry move and fight better in the mountains.

"We are trying things like a special forces tactical vest [body armor], which is about seven pounds lighter," Lennox said. "We are trying a lighter machine gun, four or five pounds lighter in small numbers, to see if that helps."

Army officials may seek money in the next several years for research into light composites for body armor. Although the Army is funding to "get the same protection at a reduced weight," the service "does not have a dedicated research-and-development and procurement line funding for body armor," said Brig. Gen. Peter Fuller, who directs Program Executive Officer Soldier.

Fuller said the Army is looking into setting up such a fund in the near future.

VEHICLES

Meanwhile, the Pentagon is working to speed up the purchase of thousands - perhaps more than 6,000 - of the lighter, more mobile Mine Resistant Ambush Protected All Terrain Vehicles requested by commanders in Afghanistan.

A host of M-ATV makers has submitted bids to Marine Corps Systems Command, which plans to begin blast-testing vehicles in coming months.

"The M-ATV will have a smaller turn radius and be capable of keeping up with some of the pickup trucks they may be chasing," Lennox said.

The Army is experimenting with Armored Security Vehicles, 12- to 14-ton four-wheel-drive combat vehicles built for survivability, speed and maneuverability.

"For example, we gave the 3rd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, about 100 Armored Security Vehicles due to the terrain challenges to get protection and mobility," Lennox said.

Army units in Afghanistan also are starting to receive Frag Kit 7, which adds armor to the gun turret and other parts of a Humvee. The kits will go on new Humvees and also be retrofitted onto some existing models, replacing the earlier Frag Kit 6 in some instances.

"It puts more armor on the roof and armor over the gunner's protection kit," said Craig Mac Nab, a spokesman for Humvee-maker AM General.

Rep. Neil Abercrombie (D-Hawaii) is chairman of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Air and Land Forces